



One Man Job

БЕОГРАД, СТАРИ ГРАД

ДУБРОВАЧКА 27

СТРЕБИЊА ДУБРЕВАЧКА

10 ГОДИНА

A SMILE,
HANDSHAKE,
AND €350,500

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РЕГИСТАРСКИ БРОЈ

ДАТУМ

РЕГИСТАРСКИ БРОЈ

Danilo Beslac

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Danilo
Beslac

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Fraud is the most profitable criminal activity one can conjure up.

Anyone can enter somewhere with a gun and pull off a robbery. No high IQ is needed for *that*.

Depending on the amount of violence applied, one can get anything from five to fifteen years for a robbery. The amount of money taken also plays a role in sentencing.

For fraud, when everything is done with a smile and a friendly handshake, the courts and judges are almost always inclined, and sometimes obliged by the law, to apply a lesser amount of time in prison for this kind of non-violent crime.

Since this is a true story, I've changed some characters' names and institutions.

One

I was fifty-five years old: twenty were spent in high-security prisons worldwide. I lived in a place that resembled a prison cell and was bigger by just a few m². Even those 50 euros per month I could hardly afford. I was living from the charity of my friends. My mother lived in a flat just a hundred meters away but did not let me sleep in her apartment. She was dying from colon cancer, but we didn't know that then.

My father had died four years previously, and my mother blamed me for everything. The people in Belgrade, Serbia, were miserable. Over a decade ago, the bombing campaign by NATO destroyed the Serbian economy, and most people lived with a minimal monthly budget. In Belgrade, the average monthly pay was 300-400 euros.

I was too old for pick-pocketing and 'fence & walls jumping,' as I called burglary. One day, while wandering through the park, my three-year-old Samsung started ringing and vibrating in my pocket. It was my friend Zoran from Moscow. He managed a nightclub and a restaurant in Moscow and was very well-connected simply because he was a very communicative and friendly guy.

After banal salutations, Zoran asked directly - "Do you remember telling me your story about Chicago and checkbooks?" - he asked.

Of course, I remembered Chicago and the fraud with checkbooks I pulled off with my now-deceased friend Djavo (Devil). He merited his nickname fully—nutcase in every sense of that word.

Thanks to the '*floating account*' that American banks practice, Devil and I earned \$75,000 US for one weekend. I came from Switzerland to the United States for the first time in 1995. The preparation took almost two months. With a false passport under the name Angelo Sut, I passed a driving test in one day

and received a driving license. A week earlier, we installed a landline in my rented one-bedroom apartment. Then we got an ID under the same name, “*Angelo Sut*,” and after passing the test for a driving license, we were ready for banks.

I opened two check accounts in two different banks in the name of Angelo Sut. Then we waited two weeks for checkbooks to arrive via post. We dropped a check for \$300,000 in a night deposit box on Friday. It was for the house purchase from one account to another. There you have it...” Devil,” and I now had a 300,000 US dollars *floating account!* We rented a Chevrolet van and went on a three-day shopping spree.

We bought pre-ordered printers, copiers, various expensive tools for builders, and other such items. They were all paying 50% of the price. Usually, that is 30%, but did I say Devil was a nutcase and the Serbian community of Chicago feared him big time?

“Yes, and?” - I answered, unsure what Zoran was getting at.

“Well, some guys over there in Belgrade are looking for someone like you, someone who knows a bit about checkbooks and banks. Knowing your present situation, I thought...” - he went on.

“You thought right; I am interested in anything really at this moment, so come to the point,” - I cut him off.

“OK then, I will give them your phone, and they will contact you. Please remember that these are serious and dangerous people,” - he said, dead serious himself. That was a childish statement for someone who spent twenty years of his life in high-security prisons worldwide.

“Zoran, I am probably the most dangerous and serious person that you have been associated with, so cut the bullshit, please,” - I told him.

Later that evening, I got a call from an unknown number. The meeting was set for the next day in Usce restaurant on the Danube river.

I arrived ten minutes earlier, and the ‘Usce’ terrace, with a full view of the Danube river, was almost empty. I sat at a table from which I could observe the entrance to the restaurant and the river on my right. I watched in enchantment as a tugboat loaded to the brim with sand was moving slowly but steadily upstream. The eternal river flow was mesmerizing, and I almost missed the arrival of the Beo-taxi and a tall, lanky guy in his 30s that stepped out.

I glanced at my inexpensive Tissot wristwatch and noted that he was ten minutes late, for I simply knew that was him. Our eyes crossed, and that split-second eye contact was enough. He walked straight to my table, and before sitting down, he just asked, knowing the answer - "Zoran's friend?" I just nodded, and he sat down. I noticed the Breitling wristwatch on his left wrist, and his jacket and shoes were quality. I do not respect people who do not respect other people's time. Fine, this guy was a show-off type.

I was keeping my mouth shut, and my thoughts were mine only. He was talking about openings of bank accounts, some kind of fraud, a sting. He told me it was already done, so they know it works. I did not ask who 'they' were, nor did I give a shit. I was only half listening because everything he said was vague and indistinct. Then came the interesting part. They will provide everything - paperwork, contracts, false IDs, three telephones, the expenses, and when it's done, 60% goes to them and 40% to me?! I smiled inwardly while my face stayed expressionless. He pulled three phones out of his jacket and gave them to me. Nenad paid for my coffee and his juice, and I told him I was short money. He took out thirty euros and gave it to me. Now I will go back to Zemun by taxi, not by bus. "Well, I didn't come for nothing. Forty-five euros is much better than fifteen. Three times better!" - I thought. Little did I know that this job would make me richer by 350,000 euros in two months, and considering how I felt better with thirty more euros in my pocket was hilarious.

Mira was "Devil's" wife. Poor Djole (Djavo-Devil) died a few years prior, and Mira lived alone. Her mother, Goca, was coming almost every day. She always brought food for her daughter, cigarettes, and everything else Mira needed, but she gave her no money because she knew that her daughter had been a heroin addict for years (Djavo's fault, of course) and that she would go straight away to buy heroin. Djavo lost everything a few years after our \$75,000 scam in Chicago.

When I came to Chicago, he had a big house in a suburb, a twenty-minute drive from downtown. He had a beautiful Romanian wife and an incredibly spoiled three-year-old daughter. When his daughter threw a tantrum, she would prostrate herself in the middle of the living room, screaming until she got what she wanted. It was driving me crazy.

He was not using his garage because inside was a speedboat with a 200 hp Mercury outboard, waiting for summer and lake

Michigan. He had three cars. His beautiful wife drove some American thing, Buick or something. He piloted a Mercedes C Class, and sometimes he would, in those days, sniff a line or two of coke and go for a ride in his Corvette Cabriolet—his pride and joy. I could not help myself. ... I envied him a bit.

We rented a small room just for the job. I was living, of course, in his house, and we periodically checked the post-box in my rented place. We were awaiting checkbooks.

A few years after our scam, Djava beat up some poor guy in a Serbian restaurant in front of 200 people. The guy ended up in the hospital with severe brain damage, and he was in a coma. After that, Devil left everything and left the United States through Mexico, flew to Europe, and returned to Belgrade. He started using all kinds of shit. Heroin, coke, weed -"Devil" consumed *everything*. He drank a lot too. In truth, he returned from Chicago and went on a suicide mission with alcohol and drugs.

He met Mira, who was twenty years younger than him, and shortly afterward, she became an addict, too. Finally, they married. I visited them often in Mira's one-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor of Prvomajska street when Djava was alive, and I would often see Mira and Goca after his death. Poor Djava. He had just gotten out of prison after serving one year, and he died from a heart attack at a bus station while waiting for the bus only a few short weeks after he was released from prison. The hospital was only 100 m away. He was fifty-five years old. I hadn't been to Mira's place for a few days, and I decided to visit her.

Mira was 'chasing the dragon' as usual when I arrived. "Chasing the dragon" is simple. One puts a bit of heroin on the foil and heats it up from below. Heroin starts turning into a brownish liquid, and you chase that smoke with any kind of tube available. You chase the smoke, but it is dragon smoke. Mira was smashed. Every few minutes, her eyes would close, and her head would drop forward. I calmly rolled a joint, and while I was smoking, I watched her in wonder, feeling more sorry for her mother than her. I did not touch anything apart from weed.

I tried almost everything, apart from a needle, but I stayed on weed. Later, much later, she came around a bit from her self-induced coma, and conversation became possible. Mira suggested I move in with her. I accepted and went to pack my few belongings at my 20m2 rented place.

TWO

It was oppressive watching Mira throwing her life away like that.

Most of the time, I was alone as she wandered somewhere all day long, which suited me just fine. I had to move. I walked down to the center of Zemun, down Bezanijska street, to the hair salon for women, "Sreta." He always had some synthetic wigs in his shop window. I prefer synthetic to natural hair wigs because they are easier to maintain. Sreta was an old friend of mine, and he inherited three hair salons from his deceased father, who was, like Sreta, the best hairdresser for women in Belgrade.

"Hey brother, I didn't even know that you were in the country!" - he welcomed me warmly. A woman client was left in the chair with her wet hair hanging over her face, and we embraced. "Give me 10 min. Girls, Turkish coffee for my brother and make it quick," - he shouted. Sreta had a slight belly and artistic fingers that handled scissors like a magician wielding a magic wand. He was an artist, really. Women clients obeyed him and worshipped him.

"Sreta, I need a few of your wigs but I cannot pay you now," - I told him.

"No problem," - he answered straight away.

"Actually, there is a small problem. I will pick two wigs but, when you close the shop, you are going to cut them to my specification" - I watched his puzzled face and started laughing.

"Then, they are for you?" - he asked.

"You got that right," - I answered. Sreta was intelligent, and he knew when not to ask questions. Besides, he knew my history; therefore, he didn't ask why I needed his wigs. It took one and a half hours, but, in the end, I was pleased with the result. I looked at a big mirror in Sreta's salon.

A distinguished oldish gentleman with a lot of grey hair and big optical glasses stared back at me.

I have been bald for years, and the transformation was total.

My next stop was another old friend who had a photoshop. Cicmil took photographs with the wigs for IDs, passports, etc. I had no money. No problem, I will pay for the photos. One day. Maybe. After that, I took bus no.15, going back uptown. I had to go and see my mother and take a few of my old suits, shirts, and ties. I stopped wearing suits years ago. I preferred jeans and sweaters, but that was not a suitable outfit for a bank.

In those days, my mother hardly got out of her bed. It was as if she was glued to it. Her face always held a painful grimace. Her hair was like dry hay and of the same hue. On the low table beside her bed was a huge crystal vase full of medications and her remote for the t.v. It was a beautiful spring day, and she was covered with three blankets. I bent down and kissed her dry, wrinkled cheek, and I thought I could smell death. A guy with a black robe, a hood, and a scythe over his shoulder was slowly floating over my mother's bed. I shivered slightly; a paralyzing current of fear went through my body at that thought. I lost my father five years ago to a heart attack. And now this?! The room smelled like a hospital ward, and I hate hospitals! Who doesn't?

"Are you hungry?" - she would croak, and her always watery eyes would leave the tv screen for a few seconds, and she would glance at me. She couldn't help herself. She has been asking me the same bloody question all my life.

"No, I have eaten," - I would usually answer. Sometimes, I would take a few bites of something from the fridge. Just to please her.

My heart is not good either. Genes. A swift and merciful way to go. My father's death was swift. For three long years, my mother had been fighting her colon cancer!

On the last evening of his life, my father and I were sitting at the kitchen table. He lit a cigarette, and after he had smoked half of it, he put it out and said:- "You see, I cannot even finish it!" That was the last time I saw my father alive. He died the next morning around 3 a.m. I was living at my father's dacha near the airport with my Ukrainian girlfriend Anna at the time. I came too late to the hospital in Bezaniska Kosa. I saw my father in the morgue. I wish I hadn't. My mother never forgave me.

I went to my bedroom and chose two suits with matching ties and four white shirts.

In those days, my mother didn't even bother to return my kisses and hugs. She was never a great pretender. I repeated the routine I performed upon my arrival and was out of there. I was filling my lungs with fresh air on the street, and I could smell the

grass in the park. I sat down on one of the empty benches, watching the kids happily play under the observant eyes of their mothers, and a wave of sadness flooded my soul and mind, and I felt deep and profound sorrow for my mother. I remembered the chorus of my song "Illusion," which I wrote in prison years ago... "We are only players in this game (called life) Once we are gone, everything will be just the same."

One of the three phones was always with me. That was the number Nenad (a fake name he presented himself with), and I will use it. I cannot even remember what name I used, for that matter. All I know and am sure of is that it was not mine. The Nokia vibrated in my pocket.

"All done?" - he asked straight away without a preamble.

"Yes, photographs are ready. Where shall we meet?" - was my answer. Half an hour later, I gave him the small envelope with photos in front of the Hotel Yugoslavia. We agreed on the time and place for a meeting the next day in the center of Belgrade.

Serbia was in a transition period with IDs and Passports. Europe wanted to let us enter under one condition - Biometric passports and IDs. Old IDs were really childish little two-page booklets with stapled photographs. Virtually anyone can falsify that. The catch was that a bank account could still be opened with an old ID.

After I went to the Caribbean islands with 350.000 euros from ROOTH bank, no one could open a bank account in Serbia with an old ID! I might have been the cause of the new ruling. You win some - you lose some, as they say.

The next day we met in the cafe "Slavia" in the center. We sat in the corner, and once the waitress had given us our drinks and was gone, we got down to business immediately. He gave me two IDs with my photographs with different wigs on them. I looked at the names. They meant nothing to me. He wanted me to open a bank account, so he gave me 10,000 dinars (100 euros).

"Do these people exist, and are the serial ID numbers identical with the original IDs of these people?" - I asked Nenad, again flashing his Breitling wristwatch. Damn, I liked that watch more and more! I was sure it would look even better on my wrist.

"Of course not," - was his answer.

"Then I cannot open any bank account because banks have access to the Police and town hall records of all the citizens, and those have to be real people registered in the town hall records," - I was trying to reason with that moron.

He persisted, insisting that it didn't matter and why don't I just do what he was asking me to do. I knew I was right, but I went anyway. AK, the Greek bank was 150 m away, and I was walking towards it in my outdated single-breasted suit, thinking that maybe I was wrong. It took me only half a minute to put my wig on at the entrance of a building next to the cafe.

Once inside the bank, I told the cashier I wished to open an account. She took my ID. A few seconds later, she looked at me and said: -"I am sorry, Sir, but you are not in the system and I cannot open an account with this ID."

"Oh yes, it must be that they annulled my old ID because I applied for a new one last week in Visegradska," - I told her and walked out of there.

Sometimes it is not very clever to talk too much. This was such a time. While I was walking back to the cafe, I felt the anger building up inside me. It was followed by a surge of adrenalin and a rapid heartbeat.

I was thinking: I had enough of this asshole and his attitude, his lack of respect. This thing won't work anyway! Not in a million years! This guy was an amateur, and that was dangerous!

This small cafe was as good as any other place. It had only a few low tables with comfortable red leather chairs. Good, maybe someone will bleed profusely there in a few minutes. No one knew me here; Belgrade was always a foreign territory for us guys from Zemun.

I didn't take my wig off. When I left the cafe a few minutes earlier, only Mr. Breitling and the waitress were inside. After giving us our drinks, she went back behind the bar and started writing rapidly on her phone. I hoped that no new customers had arrived during my short absence.

While I walked, I scanned the area for my exit routes. Old habits die hard. I was all pumped up and ready to do some serious damage to that imbecile.

When I returned to the cafe, everything was the same. Good. I sat down and took my glasses off. I leaned forward. I looked into Nenad's eyes and said very quietly: -"Now listen to me carefully, you stupid fuck. I was right, and you were wrong. What are your intentions anyway? Do you want to put my old ass in prison knowing I did twenty years already? Now, you either show me those papers you have in your shopping bag and tell me every little detail of what we are doing here, or you can go fuck yourself!"

“Hey, hey, calm down, old man...” - he started apologetically, but I had enough of his BS, and I cut him off, not allowing him to finish.

I whispered: “You call me “old man” once again, this fifty-five-year-old will send your thirty-five-year-old skinny ass to a hospital.”

He sat comfortably in his chair, totally relaxed and unperturbed, self-assured. Tough guy. In one instant, I become a different person, a predator and survivor: kill or be killed by another inmate in a high-security prison, locked up with other predatory animals. In a second, my anger turned into an uncontrollable rage. Never was able to simply count to ten. When I go off, I go off *all the way!*

Mr. Breitling didn't have a clue what was coming. He was avoiding eye contact. I leaned forward, covering the heavy crystal, star-shaped ashtray at the table with the palm of my right hand, and told him: -”Look me in the eyes shithead when I am talking to you. Or I will do you here and now, you little pompous piece of shit!” It was not even a whisper now. It sounded more like a hissing rattlesnake poised to strike.

This was different, and he sat straight up with fear in his eyes, holding my stare for a few short seconds and lowering his eyes towards my right hand, now holding a tightly star-shaped ashtray. I was holding it so tight that my fingers were white and bloodless. Now, this piece of human garbage was mine. I had him. I wanted so badly to hurt him; just take the plastic bag with papers from that asshole while he is down. And the Breitling, of course. But I still didn't know what this was all about and how it was supposed to go down.

I needed information. I needed details.

He leaned back in his chair as far as he could, and now I could see the panic in his eyes. Nenad couldn't take his eyes off my right hand. One doesn't need to carry a weapon if one knows how to look for one in every situation. There are so many things around that can be used as a weapon. A spoon, a fork, a pen, an ashtray, a cup, a car key, any key really...the list is endless.

Any of those can be used to badly hurt or kill another person, regardless of their size. In Offenbach, Germany, eons ago, I hit a guy with the edges of a hardcover book and broke his larynx. It happened in the foyer of a building entrance where my girlfriend lived. She was really hot, sexy, and tall. He grabbed her ass in front of the elevators and nearly died for that stupid gesture.

I took the hardcover book from her hands, pivoted around, and hit him hard. Hellen later told me what happened afterward. After I had run off, she didn't panic and remembered that a doctor lived in a flat on the first floor. He came down immediately and asked Hellen if she had a pen. She did have a pen in her handbag. The good doctor stabbed the guy's larynx with a pen. She said she thought she would faint, but that saved his life. He was able to breathe through that pen until the ambulance arrived! That stupid guy was so lucky! So was I!

"Listen, we all want to make money and nothing else. I said I was sorry, and I apologized. Shall we go back to work now?" Nenad said apologetically.

I gave him a long, hard stare just so that he knew that from now on, his visit to the emergency room of some town hospital could happen at any given moment. I took a black plastic folder with the papers inside that he had laid on the table. I started perusing contracts of sale between an individual and a big company based in Stara Pazova. The Company was American, and the director and his deputy were Germans.

The signatures of both men were required for any money transfers. There were blank checks inside the folder with both signatures. There was a contract for the sale of the 400m² house in the center of Belgrade for 1,050,000 euros. Milos Milosevic was selling his home to the company BIRO from Stara Pazova.

After signing the contract, 30% of the total will be transferred immediately to the account of Mr. Milosevic in the AK bank from the ROOTH Deutsche bank account of BIRO Company.

In Serbia, every foreign company has to disclose on an official website where they have their business accounts. Biro Company from Stara Pazova had four accounts in ROOTH bank. The company consisted of several can factories, and they had a lot of workers who, in total, were paid 600.000 euros every month between the 28th of the month and the 7th of the following month.

After questioning Nenad for half an hour, I had a clearer picture, but I still needed time to think about everything. Fine, they had a good forger and probably someone inside the company. A cleaning lady, maybe? I didn't know, and Nenad wasn't saying anything. He didn't want to leave the papers with me either because "they" had to falsify a few more official documents. I told him that my ID with wig and name, Milos Milosevic was fine. They need to find out the identity of the courier of the company. We need a photograph of the courier's

ID, I told him. Without that, nothing could be done. Stara Pazova is a forty-minute drive away from downtown Belgrade. All big factories and hangars are situated on those flat fields.

In those villages around Belgrade, the internet goes down frequently. What does the company do then if they need something done? They send the courier with a car, right?

Three

I would go to the “Status” bar in Prvomajska street for my morning coffee.

I was watching crowded old buses laboring uphill towards Maria Bursac settlement. My village-like-Zemun is known for its cafes, lively late-night bars, and fish restaurants along its riverside promenade. Only now do I realize how happy my youth years were in the 1980s. Downtown Belgrade was just five miles away, but that was another territory altogether. There is something about this small city and its youth, though. No other Belgrade municipality had as many young career criminals.

There must be some kind of deranged magnetic field beneath Zemun. I watched those swaggering young guys arriving in their BMWs, Mercedes, and Audis, and I thought how very few of them would live long lives.

Nothing changes, really. They walked like they owned the street. I walked like that thirty years ago. Some of them would come to my table and shake my hand; some would simply nod in recognition and respect. In the old days, only a few of us had guns, and now, because of the civil war that ravaged the country for years, all of them had guns. In Zemun these days—as everywhere else, life is cheap. A few thousand euros and you got your young junkie-killer.

The ones that are not junkies are just a little bit more expensive but much more reliable. They take no chances and often just walk behind a guy and put a few bullets in the back of his head. From a distance of only a few. cm. These days, there are light bulletproof vests on the black market. They often use a small .22 caliber because it doesn't make a lot of noise and does its job as well as 9mm, for example. It is hard to miss from that distance, and a bulletproof vest won't help. Many of these young men participated in a bloody civil war; they were only teenagers.

The ones that came back were no longer teenagers. They were experienced *killers*.

A few of those kids were like my own, and they saw a father figure in me. When they start telling me things I don't wish to hear, I tell them that I don't want to know. One of them, Neki, was parking his BMW in front. I glanced at my watch. He was two minutes late.

"I found him. He told me that he knows you. He is in my car. Shall I bring him to the table, or...?" - Neki was saying when he approached my table.

"Of course he knows me, silly! I have to talk to him. If I didn't, I wouldn't have asked you to find him and bring him here. By the way, well done, Neki, and thank you. I hope you didn't scare him or anything?" - I asked him with a smile.

No one knew what I was preparing, including Neki, and I didn't hide *anything* from that kid. Almost never. It is just that I did not believe in this job. I did not think that it might work out for one single reason. The biggest barrier was the following general rule that all the banks in Belgrade—and there were many—had: Once the money was in the account, 48 hours had to go by before you could touch it. Some banks, very few, were sometimes not adhering to this rule because they didn't want to lose a client or for a number of other reasons. AK Bank was often breaking this unwritten rule. That is why Nenad wanted me to open an account in AK Bank.

Sceka was the best forger in the old days, and Neki told me that he was still working from time to time. A small, balding man with strands of white hair covering a small part of his head was limping toward my table with a smile on his face.

He had very dark circles under his eyes. Sceka had something I call "a hanging belly." This guy was drinking far too much beer for his own good. I no longer recognized the once young, vibrant, and always smiling little guy with thick black hair. That lively kid from thirty-five years ago was gone. In his place was this ruin of a man.

"Long time, ay? You look great, man! - he was saying.

"So does a car you put in a garage for twenty years. You drive it out after all that time, and it looks new. In prison, you are told when to eat, exercise, bathe, and, if you can: when to sleep.

Every day you eat at the same time. You exercise at the same time. You read a lot. There is a lot of spare time. It is up to you to use it or waste it. I hope I used it efficiently: I *tried* not to waste it," - I explained.

“What happened to your leg?” - I asked.

“You don’t know? Do you remember that kid, the son of Marko Blesic, who had a car repair shop on Ugrinovacka street? His kid Aca shot me fifteen years ago because I falsified a passport for him, and he was arrested on the Italian border with it.

He blamed me. It was a long time ago. I am lucky I am walking. He shot me with a 12-bore sawed-off shotgun, crazy kid.” - Sceka explained. “The kid is in Greece, doing life for murder.”- he went on.

I really wasn’t interested in those maudlin stories from the past. I hated it.

“Listen, give me your number. Maybe I will need some paperwork done, deeds of a house, a contract of sale, etc. For you, it is a child’s game,”- I told him.

“No problem, man,”- he answered cheerfully. Neki had given me some money, so I ordered a beer for Sceka. I might need this man. We chatted for another hour about the “good old days” and parted. I hated those “time machine” talks. Who gives a shit anyway about what happened 15-20 years ago?

I walked slowly back home because it was yet another beautiful sunny day. This spring was particularly beautiful. Mira was at the flat, smashed as usual. She lay prostrate on the sofa with her eyes closed and mouth half open. Mira was a thoroughly good person. She really loved Djavo. Mira faithfully waited for him to come out of prison. Once, when he called from prison, I happened to be at Mira’s place. She told him straight away that I was there. When she passed me the phone, I heard his voice:” So, you mother fucker! You are fucking my wife while I am inside! That’s a real friend! - he was shouting on the other side and laughing at the same time. I did not react well to that. I passed the phone to Mira and told her:” Tell that unstable husband of yours that I don’t wish to talk with him.”

And I didn’t. When he got out, he called me with Mira and said:

“Don’t be such an asshole. I was joking. When are you gonna pass by? I have some really good weed!”

The bastard knew how much I love good weed! I promised that I would pass by. That was the last time I heard poor Devil’s voice. Mira told me afterward that he was complaining about pain in his chest a few days before he died. She urged him to see a doctor.

I wonder what he felt. Surprise, fear, and probably searing pain in his chest. And maybe he was still alive when he hit the pavement at that bus stop. He was probably surprised that he saw the pavement from that strange angle—perhaps unaware that he was dying. No, Devil knew. He knew that he was leaving this world for good. R.I.P, old friend!

Mira was always willing to help her friends. She was good-looking when she was young, but little of that past beauty was visible now, albeit she was only thirty-five years old. I went to the kitchen. The fridge held nothing interesting. I was thinking of going to the *'hungry street'* as we called it. There was a street full of small locals in Novi Beograd, one next to another, and the delicious smell of grilled meat was floating in the air everywhere. The best *'Cevapcici'* and *'pljeskavica'* in town. The white Nokia started vibrating. Nenad's number.

"There are two couriers in the company. We will have to wait until our man manages to get a photo of the ID of one of them," - as always, he came straight to the point, and that's about the only thing I liked about this shithead.

"How old?" - I just asked.

"One is in his 20s and the other is in his 40s," - Nenad answered, his former haughtiness gone.

"Well, that one in his 20s won't do. So it has to be the older one," - I said.

"Understood," - was all he said before hanging up.

"I have to open an account in the AK bank," - I thought.

The next day at 10 a.m. I entered AK bank in Kneza Milosa street in the Belgrade center. I was decently dressed. Old-fashioned but decent. I borrowed Neki's Blue Marine Rolex, which was now covered with the left cuff of my jacket. I had a full head of grey hair, and I was constantly reminding myself not to look up where the cameras were. I entered the bank *immersed* in papers untidily and clumsily held in both of my hands. I opened the entrance door with my elbow. I had wide-rimmed glasses with slightly darkened lenses, a cheap Chinese thing I bought in a Chinese store at Zemun's market. Fifteen years ago, you couldn't see a single Chinese person in Zemun. Now, half of Prvomajska street was theirs, and it seemed there were more and more of them each year.

I asked a nice-looking young lady on the other side of the glass barrier:- "And good day to you, pretty face!" (she had a beautiful smile too, and I was glad I made her smile) - I would

like to see the manager, if I may. I am selling my family house and..."- I went on.

"No problem, sir. I will see if Mr. Sergei is free."- she answered and got up. I couldn't help myself, and my eyes followed her gracious movement and beautifully shaped ass with perfect oval lines.

"You bloody fool. *Concentrate!*"- my inner voice screamed in my head.

She disappeared behind the partition wall to return just a minute later with a clean-cut young man in his early 30s. Sergei was eager, and that was good. His suit and tie were flawless.

We shook hands.

"Please take a seat, Sir. How can we help you?"- he offered politely with a wild welcoming smile.

I sat down. On the phone, he sounded older. I liked this kid. What I liked most about him was that he was eager to please. Most likely, I thought, he started on this post not too long ago.

"For someone so young and already a manager in a big bank...impressive,"- I told him. And that was not BS - I was impressed with his professionalism and manners.

I crossed my legs and put my left arm over my knee. The Rolex Blue Mariner flashed in all its glory, and Sergei couldn't have missed it even if he wanted to. A wristwatch is a sort of business ID card in the business world. Having ten thousand dollars on my wrist won't hurt. On the contrary, if I were an actor in a movie, that performance would likely be nominated for a venerated, little, insignificant statue shining in all its golden splendor... cameras flashing to record that *historic* moment.

"I love my job, Sir. I just started two months ago and am enjoying it. Did you say, Mr. Milosevic, if I remember correctly our phone call?" - he asked. I took the ID in Milos Milosevic's name and gave it to him.

"You are Sergei, right. I am Milos. Can we just drop that "Sir" thing Sergei, please? It makes me feel so damn old. My daughter Maria is approximately your age." - I had to get familiar with this guy as much as I possibly could. So I went on: "But she lives in Washington with her husband and I miss her so much."

This was the truth. My daughter did live in Washington at that time. If you mix the lies with a little bit of fact, you are not just saying things, but you are saying them with absolute conviction, which makes all the difference.

I went on with my pre-prepared story. "I am selling a big family house to a company based in Pazova, and they will make

the transaction in dinars; I would like AK bank to handle the transaction and convert those dinars into euros once the money is in my account.”

I went on: “AK bank was highly recommended to me by several of my close friends. I have two aunties and three teenage nieces sitting on my neck and repeating continuously, every day for the past three years, that I have to sell the house!

Now, I am negotiating the final stages with my lawyer, who is in touch with their lawyers, and we have finally agreed on the price of -1,050,000 euros. Presently, the lawyers are composing a contract and working out the payment allocations and details. They will transfer the money in two installments within a few working days, pause between the two, and the money will be in dinars. I will, of course, bring all necessary papers in a few days or copies of the same.”

We spent the next forty minutes opening two accounts in Mr. Milos Milosevic’s name - a dinar account and a euro account. I thought that all went down perfectly well. Sergei and I parted with a warm handshake like old friends, and I promised to be in touch as soon as the contract was completed.

Outside it was a pristine April day. My bald head was sweating slightly under the wig, and I had a slight grin. “This might just work” - I said to myself. It was actually a moment when fantasy became a possible reality, and I felt the old, almost forgotten feeling of thrill. It was a good feeling. My steps became lighter, and I hurried to the first entrance of a building and took the damn wig off. I took my jacket off too.

Down to shirtsleeves. Then I took off the tie, walked out onto the street, and started walking towards a bus station. The sun was warming my bald head with its rays, and I felt good.

This just might work - I kept thinking. And what if it doesn’t? Frankly, I didn’t give a shit. I hadn’t spoken with my Godfather for a few years now, and he had been helping me for years financially; God Bless him!

But now, I was on my own. This was a One Man Job.

Without his help, life was hard. If I land in court for attempted fraud, that would be half a year, max... Maybe less. Laughable affair for me after all those years of Hell!

I already had my speech ready for the jury. Banks from all over the world came to our—and every other war-torn country—to give loans to the masses and then rob them blind with their rates and charges.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I plead guilty to this charge of attempted fraud. I am only sorry I didn’t make it and got caught.

I am fifty-five years old. I never hurt anyone; I never said a bad word to anyone. On the contrary, all they got was “Good day” and a smile from me. Banks are the biggest thieves of all, and now you will judge me for trying to steal from them? Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, here you have a straightforward case of a small thief stealing from a big thief. Nothing but a handshake and smile, mind you.

As you know, I have already spent twenty years of my life behind bars. Do you think some more prison time will reform me? At this age? Really? I tried to defraud ROOTH bank. We all know here that they are cheating millions of people every day!

Do I feel guilty for trying to pull a scam and take a few hundred thousand euros from them? What do you think? You are damn right! I don’t feel guilty at all, but you can be sure that they don’t either.’- if I go down, and that seems to be the most likely outcome under present circumstances, at least I will have my speech for the jury ready.

Four

It was time to visit my mother. I would see her two or three times per week and spend an awkward 30-40 minutes in almost utter silence. Hated those visits. Thank God she had Rajka, who was also coming 3-4 times per week to clean the flat and shop for my mother. She was the wife of my mother's ex-boss when she was working as a saleswoman—a wonderful and kind person.

I pressed the intercom button of my mother's flat at the entrance of the building and waited. And waited. After ten minutes, I started worrying—as I always do. Probably getting old, that's all. Older people worry about everything, don't they?

This wasn't the first time. Sometimes she was in so much pain that she simply wouldn't open the door to anybody, especially me. Often, she was in deep slumber from morphine and all kinds of diazepam. Standing there with two small bread loaves in a paper bag, I felt stupid. I always brought it because she liked just that kind.

Her's was a small four-story building in Maria Bursac street with only three flats on each floor. Someone is coming out or going in every few minutes from big buildings, but not here.

Just when I was starting to walk away, I heard my mother's croaky voice coming from the intercom, and a second later, the buzz of the entrance door sounded, informing me that it was now open. I took two stairs at a time, climbing to the second floor where my mother's flat was, and sharp pain in my left knee reminded me that I could not do things I was doing fifteen-twenty years ago.

Walking four and a half meters - five meters (15-17 ft) from her bed to the door and back was an ordeal for my mother. She would walk back to her bed, bent in half with pain and looking older than her eighty-two years. She was losing her hair, and her back was killing her. She itched terribly all over her body and

would often scratch herself furiously... The itching was driving her crazy.

Her whole world was on that 18" TV screen. She had her regular serials, reality shows, and dramas that she watched every evening and, sometimes, all night until early morning hours. There was no joy in her life, no laughter. I watched that old wrinkled face and remembered how beautiful she was in her younger years and how much she loved life. By now, the pain had become constant.

They say that people who take their own lives are cowards. I tried it myself twice... and I can tell you that what they say is utter BS.

It takes a lot of courage, and it is an unbelievably hard thing to do. If I had a life like my mother's, I am sure I would try to end it in Hemingway's or Hunter S. Thompson's style. As it is, my mother was a fighter, though, to the very end. She drank all kinds of herbal treatments, and her daily intake of fifteen tablets for all sorts of ailments was a part of that fight.

As always, I bent down and hugged her unresponsive frail body. I couldn't wait to get out of there and breathe the fresh air outside. While walking down Maria Bursac street, a horn from a passing car brought me out of my reverie.

"Hey, walking, eh? Need a lift, old friend? - my friend Jelke was shouting through the open window of his Audi. I heard he was deported from Germany after serving eight years for murder, and we haven't seen each other in years. In the old days, Jelke ran nightclubs. He was well-connected with people from show business.

Jelke had broad shoulders and was in terrific physical shape for a man over fifty. I slumped into the Audi's opulent leather car seat and told him-, "Yes, I am walking. You should try it sometime. It is the best thing to do at our age." "Walking?! I run 10 km everyday' bro!"- he said.

"Listen, Jelke. I am really short on money. Can you pass some paper my way? I blurted out without a preamble. He took several 200 euro notes out of his pocket and gave me one.

"I am on my way to pay registration for the car. One note is all I can spare, brother." - he explained.

'Thanks, man,' - I told him. I went straight to a pharmacy and bought three creams for my mother's itching problem.

That was the last time I saw Jelke alive. Two months later, he got into his Audi, and there was a big BOOM under his ass. He died instantly. I saw a picture of his slumped, lifeless body in the

driving seat on the internet. I was in Cuba, Havana, already. I ordered Cuba libre and drank a toast to my friend's soul.

A week went by. Another week passed, and I wondered what was happening on Nenad's end. For better or worse, I had it all figured out. I needed those papers. I didn't need Nenad, that was sure, nor did I care about that asshole. "Sixty-percent, my ass! That guy is really a dreamer." I thought.

On a crisp spring day, I was on the water in a small boat with a 4hp Tomos outboard engine the last week of April. The boat belonged to my friend Bata. Suddenly the white Nokia started to vibrate in my pocket.

"When can we meet and where? Where are you?" - he asked.

"I am on the Danube river in a boat. I could be at Venezia restaurant on the waterfront in a half hour." - I told him.

"See you there in a half-hour" - was all he said.

I didn't like this. What was this secrecy about all of a sudden? Maybe this asshole is not coming alone. I called Neki. "Where are you right now?" - I asked him. He was driving around Zemun with his friend, sharing a joint, and listening to music.

"Do you have your piece with you?" - I asked.

"Pops, you know I always do. My friend is carrying too. What's up?" - he asked. So I told him. Bata turned the boat around, and we headed for Venezia. As we were nearing Venezia, I spotted Nenad sitting alone on a bench and feeding pigeons with bread crumbs. Neki and his friend sat two benches away and were in animated conversation. I got out and pushed the boat with Bata inside back to the river, and he chugged away against the current.

Nenad took a new ID from his plastic bag and passed it to me. I glanced at it and said to him: - "Let's go over this documentation once again."

He passed me the plastic shopping bag with the papers inside, and I lit a cigarette. With my peripheral vision, I saw Neki and his friend approaching our bench, and they sat on each side of Nenad and squeezed him between them. I didn't want to take any chances and have any kind of a tug-war with him over the plastic bag at the riverside promenade full of people.

Neki pushed his right hand with his sweater over it into Nenad's right kidney. Neki's pride and joy was his 9mm Zastava 99. A big gun with a 15-round magazine and one of the best in the world—made in Serbia, Kragujevac. Nenad froze. I saw that Bata was back, and he tied his boat just a few meters from us as we had agreed.

“You have two choices, Mr. Big Shot: You can go for a boat ride with us, and I wouldn’t take that option if I were you. Or: you can be driven out of MY town in that yellow Opel Kadett Beo taxi you can see on the street, with all your limbs and bones intact.

Since I nearly ended up doing time because of your stupidity and incompetence, I will have to be compensated somehow, don’t you think?” - I deftly unclasped the Breitling from his wrist and put it on my wrist.

“ I do not need to say it, but I will for your own good. If you come back to Zemun, you *will* go for a boat ride,”- While I was talking, I looked at his fear-stricken eyes and thought he got the message. I got up and walked away. Neki and his friend knew what to do.

Five

I woke up early. A long shower cleared my head and allowed me to think more clearly about the day. The fragrant and robust Turkish coffee removed the last remains of sleep... I was dressed in my best suit, and the critical documents with all the necessary stamps and signatures were strewn about on the low coffee table in front of me.

It was 11.30 am. I carefully took my unfinished cup of coffee and replaced it. All I needed now was spilled coffee all over those documents. Sceka had done an excellent job. Everything looked official, and all dry stamps were visible and readable.

On all the documents was today's date-30th of April 2013. I checked my passport and the print of my electronic air ticket inside. Belgrade-Podgorica (Montenegro)- 30th of April 2013 at 18.30. I had difficulty persuading Bata last night to buy me a ticket online with his credit card. Just in case. Montenegro was another country now, and I knew I had a plane to Moscow tomorrow midday from Podgorica—just in case.

I slowly and deliberately rolled a big fat joint, and after only a few puffs, a serene calm came over me. The weed was good. I closed my eyes and relaxed. I glanced at the time. It was 12.15. Time to go.

Biro company had some 150 employees. They also had a separate accounting section. On the premises, they had a huge canteen. Their lunch break was between 13h-14:15h (1-2:15 pm). Hence, I had a time frame within which I had to complete my operation. I ordered a taxi and finished my joint while waiting for it on the street.

At precisely 12.50h, I entered the branch office of the ROOTH bank at Slavia square. I had a letter of authority signed by both directors of the company stating that I could deliver and receive mail and documents on behalf of BIRO. I also had a sheet of paper with the four accounts that the company had in the

ROOTH bank. My problem was that I didn't know in which of the four accounts the money sat.

There was a client in the box over which was written "Business Accounts." I sat down and waited. I did not like the look of the bank employee at all. He was in his mid-30s and had glasses. He looked far too intelligent to me at that moment. Intelligent and sharp. "OK, calm down. The internet is down, and they just sent me to check the balance on all four accounts—that is all," - I told myself.

My turn came, and I didn't even sit down when I approached. I was a courier, and they were always in a hurry. So I laid down my letter of authority with the matching ID and the sheet with the numbered accounts.

"Sir, would you like me to tell you the balance, or... ?" - he asked.

I was not ready for that, but I reacted instantly. "My memory is not that good. Just write the balance beside each account, please." - I requested politely.

My heartbeat went into fifth gear when he wrote the sum next to the third account. 67,000,000 dinars!!!! Over 600,000 euros!!!! SHIIIIIT!!!!

"Thank you." - I managed to say, and I was out of there.

Couriers are always in a hurry.

I entered the first building, quickly perused my checks with different account numbers, and found the corresponding one. Everything was in the right place, and only the square where the amount should be was empty. I hesitated only for a second and deftly wrote 40,000,000 dinars. A glance at my newly acquired watch told me it was 13.10h (1:10 pm)!!!!

250m (825 ft) away was another branch of ROOTH bank, and I started walking relatively fast toward my next destination. However, before reaching the bank, I realized I was slightly sweating again under the wig. So, I stopped, took a breather, and cleaned my forehead and neck with a handkerchief. Then, I sidled toward the entrance.

There was no client in the cubicle of "BUSINESS ACCOUNTS," and I went straight to it. In the box, behind the monitor on the office table, there was a plump lady in her 40s with a ridiculous hairstyle. Her bright red and yellow dress with flowers was no less absurd. I gave her the most disarming smile I could muster and sat down.

"My sister got one that is almost exactly the same..." - I started.

“Excuse me, I didn’t quite get that,” - she said with a puzzled expression.

“Your dress” - I pointed out.

“Ah, the dress. Do you like it? I bought it in Paris last year during a visit to my sister who lives there. She married a French guy, and they have two beautiful kids. I miss them, and I miss Paris. So in December, God willing, I am going to visit them again” - she went on and on.

While listening politely, giving her the impression that I found her story sooooo interesting, I was arranging documents from my folder on the table...1: a two pages contract of sale notary certified 2: a copy from a town hall of the full ownership of the house on Mr. Milos Milosevic name 3: a check for 40,000,000 dinars from BIRO’s ROTH bank account to Mr. Milosevic’s account in the AK bank and of course 4: my letter of authority.

I couldn’t see the front of the monitor. She was perusing all the documents, looking at the monitor and typing, doing all that while she kept talking about her beloved Paris. Suddenly she pressed a key with finality and said:- “Done.” I couldn’t believe it. I was afraid she might hear my heart pounding. “Thank you. I still have four deliveries to make. Have a good day and a smashing time in Paris in December;”- I told her, getting up.

“I will, thank you. You too have a good day, Sir;”- she answered cheerfully.

I glanced at my wristwatch on my way out. 13.45!?! Wow! I was running out of time. Within minutes I flagged down a taxi and thanked God that so many of them were around these days. It was a 10-minute ride from Slavia to the AK branch on Kneza Miloša.

I took another wig from my bag and quickly changed wigs in the back of the taxi. I saw the driver watching me curiously in his rearview mirror. I told him:- “I am late for a general rehearsal in the theater. Could you hurry, please?”- he nodded and hit the pedal. I entered the AK branch at 13.58 as Milos Milosevic, and I saw Sergei smiling behind his desk.

“The money is in your account, Sir. I changed dinars into euros. The total is 357,752 euros,” - he said.

“Finally. Fine, I will withdraw €350,000 and the rest will remain in the account until Friday, and by that time, the rest of the money should be in the account as stipulated in the contract,” - I said.

“Of course, Sir. It will take some time... documents require your signature. Would you like coffee or tea? - he asked.

“Coffee, please,” - I replied.

A few minutes later, my coffee arrived, and Sergei’s assistant laid the documents in front of me. I started signing. It was actually happening, and I simply couldn’t believe it! Everything was going so smoothly!!!

I glanced at my watch; it was already 14.20 h (2:20 pm)! I pictured a mass of employees stampeding out of the canteen and returning to their respective workplaces after the lunch break. “O God, please...” - I was silently praying.

Every time I heard a phone ring, I thought...that’s for me. Now they are going to come and tell me sternly: “Sir, come with us please.” A sheer panic would hit me for a few seconds, and then unnatural calm would return. I was almost sure that the security would approach me in a moment or two, and the farce would end.

It seemed there was no end to it. I kept signing, totally resigned to the inevitable fate awaiting me because it was 14.45h! And yet, I was perfectly indifferent and, therefore, unnaturally calm. I wouldn’t even try to run. I did not give a damn! I signed a few more pages in the indicated spaces and suddenly saw the tall guy coming from the back with several packets of 500 euro notes!!!!

I got up dreamily from my chair and approached the teller. Only a glass barrier was between me and all that money. There was a bank’s paper band around each packet, on which was written 50,000 Euros. There were *seven* of them. The teller removed the band and put the money in the counting machine.

I wanted to tell him there was no need for that as I trust banks, but I kept my mouth shut. He put the money in a black plastic bag and handed it to me. Then, I swear to God, people, the following happened. Sergei approached me, and while we shook hands, he told me: - “Glad to do business with you, Sir. If we had more clients like you our job would be much easier.” I swear he actually *said* that!

“Thank you. I will see you this Friday then. The family is waiting. Have a good day.”

I walked out and melted immediately into the passing crowd on Knez Mihailova street. Tightly held under my armpit in the ordinary shopping bag were those packets, and I could feel them. My step was light. I was *euphoric*! I was walking, hardly noticing miserable people around me, all scuttling, lost in their thoughts and worries. Beautiful Caribbean sunsets were on my mind, and my excitement was boundless and hard to contain. Finally, I

entered bus no.15, which would take me over the Brankov bridge back to my Zemun.

A few hours later, I was fastening my safety belt on board the plane for Podgorica and thinking about God and his mysterious ways. *Twisted Justice!* The plane took off and started climbing, bringing me just a little bit closer to Him.

I silently thanked Him while watching a spectacular sunset through the little window, and I couldn't stop grinning like an idiot.

The End

About Danilo

I am a 65 year old Serbian who spent 20 of those 65 in high security prisons all over the world. You want my bio? My autobiography *Confession of a Pick-Pocket (Just Read the Fu**ing Book)* is undergoing the final edit and you will be able to buy it soon.